

Developing classroom competence through peer-review

Graham Martin

*Teaching and Learning
Development Unit,
University of Bradford*

This case study describes:

- a structured approach to classroom observation in design and technology in secondary schools
- how, through peer-review, mature trainees are helped to develop the professional competencies and team skills of the effective classroom practitioner and department member
- how the process builds on the evidential reflection of classroom performance so that personal abilities are refined through the observation of others

Introduction

Much of the attention which politicians have turned to teacher education in the UK may be seen to be more to do with the location rather than the quality of training. There is some implication that as long as the trainee spends an extended period of time in the classroom, then an enhanced quality of professional will emerge. Experienced classroom practitioners undoubtedly have much to offer the developing teacher but it is sometimes overlooked that their expertise is based on more than just having had time to practice.

An apprenticeship model of teacher training tends to ignore the range and complexity of the competencies necessary to be a successful classroom practitioner. A trade approach which is based upon subject knowledge and situated skills may well lack the essential third ingredient of understanding – the quality which enables an individual to unpick experience and to use it to construct successful and transferable strategies.

The development of professional classroom activity which will promote a quality teaming experience for pupils is subtle and interactive. It requires the individual consciously to engage with the many and dynamic elements of the encounter while attempting to adhere to a pre-planned practice. By its very nature teaching is a transient activity which calls for a

considerable degree of personal awareness and mental agility.

Whatever the prime qualities of the successful practitioner might be, they are displayed within a complex social interaction which might change in an instant. Disentangling this complex of inter-relationships is an essential and sometimes difficult process for newly qualified trainees. This problem might be due to the newness of it all while experienced teachers may also encounter difficulties as they have absorbed the differing complexity into the wholeness of effective professional practice.

The trainee, then, needs not only to be present in the classroom but also in some way inside the head of the teacher if real professional development is to happen. Classroom observation has to be an active and participative experience for all concerned. The work of Schön (1983, 1987) would suggest that to be beneficial the observation of teaching/learning situations should allow those involved to experience *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. If the goal is individuals who can reflect intelligently upon their actions then experiencing and actively observing these learning encounters is a major aspect of professional development.

Further to this, contemporary schooling is an immensely collaborative act. Teams of teachers are expected to work in 'departments' or in much looser combinations and to support and nurture each others' abilities. This is a long way from the closed door practice of former years and requires the employment of a range of interpersonal skills. There is a need for a high degree of professional trust and the development of a climate which allows critical appraisal without loss of individual integrity.

These again are subtle skills which need developing and which should constitute an important part of a teacher's initial preparation. When they are combined the reflective teacher can operate in a community of learning teachers.

The strategy

This approach to the development of practitioner skills was developed with mature trainees on a two-year Bachelor of Education (now BSc) course of initial teacher education in Design and Technology. All of the trainees came from full time employment and the majority had a background in engineering.

The peer-review approach was developed to complement the largely individual performance of the block school placement and particularly aimed to:

- develop observation skills
- formulate and practice appropriate evaluative language
- gain insights on personal performance through the observation of others
- provide access to a range of teaching approaches
- create a focal point for the combining of experienced and novice observations
- create a forum for wider educational debate.

Walker and Adelman (1987) have clearly stated that the development of observation skills is of considerable long-term benefit to the observer as well as the observed:

"We want to develop the idea that the observational role is not simply a temporary role that the student leaves behind, but that it is a role that he or she internalizes and carries on into their teaching. We believe that good tutors are those who are able, at critical points, to distance themselves from classroom activities, to see themselves as others see them, and to adjust their actions accordingly." (p5)

The need for an innovative approach to classroom practice to make these benefits available to all trainees was evident from

earlier experience of groups of up to five trainees being assigned to small departments on a one day per week placement. Even though team teaching strategies were used often the class size, studio/workshop environment or the timetable for the specific day were unsympathetic to the sole reliance on this methodology and there was a clear need for a more structured approach.

The features of this approach were explained to the year group of trainees by the college tutor responsible for the school placement. This description was supported by a booklet which specified the intentions and practices of this strategy and required trainees to write evaluations of their own performance (not that of others) and to formulate a summative assessment with development targets. Class teachers were similarly briefed on the process and the recording requirements.

Day one began by class teachers outlining the teaching topics they intended to explore in the next lesson and inviting individual trainees to lead on specific features or the whole lesson. Initially the trainees were able to volunteer their services depending upon particular expertise and confidence but as the placement progressed guidance was provided so that the trainees would expand and develop personal experience across the broad field of design and technology. The class teacher would then highlight any particular features which should be included in the input, standards which might be expected and provide a brief sketch of the pupils' previous experience.

The presenting trainee might be expected at this point to ask questions, speculate on teaching strategies and take advice from the group. Further information on the norms of the department, schemes of work, the teaching/learning environment, the organisation of the school day, the available resources, etc., were gained during the remainder of the day.

Within this school/college framework the trainees were expected to work as a self-organising group. Once each trainee had had the opportunity to put some detail on

his/her particular input it was essential that the group met to review plans. The benefits of this were:

- the presenter had the opportunity to briefly explain the intended teaching input
- the whole group would contribute ideas and help to refine the intentions and by so doing have an investment in the process
- each trainee could benefit from the prior experience of others
- the observers were fully briefed on the intended learning outcome
- the presenter could alert the observers to particular features for attention e.g. clarity of explanations, quality of marker board work, support given to individual pupils, etc.

Each trainee could then progress with some confidence to the detailed preparation of their presentation.

The performance of each trainee was observed by the rest of the group and the class teacher. It was stressed that each observation must involve the recording of information as all evaluative comments must be supported by specific reference to the performance. This generally involved the taking of notes although one school tested the use of video feedback.

The review of classroom performance was arranged during or at the end of the school day as the presence of the class teacher was essential. In these sessions the presenters always began the process by offering their evaluations of the performance. This gave the presenters some control over the review and helped to set the tone of the discussion. Less successful features were usually acknowledged at this point making it easier for the novice observers to engage in meaningful dialogue and speculative advice.

Invariably trainees had much to say on critical matters but they generally had to be encouraged to highlight positive features. This is not a criticism of them as individuals as they entered this process with positive and confident attitudes, but is the result of the often found inclination to more easily articulate what went wrong than to identify the specifics of why it went right. Trainees were encouraged then to begin each of their critiques with positive statements.

A further cautionary note was added through the recognition of the dangers of the 'expert' syndrome. It is a well known psychological phenomena that when someone observes another person performing a familiar task, the observer often takes on the role of an expert irrespective of his/her actual level of competence (e.g. note the interaction between a soccer crowd and the referee or the altercations often resulting from trying to teach a partner to drive a car!). Clearly this state of affairs has to be guarded against in a teaching situation if both observer and observed alike are to gain a realistic self-image and benefit professionally from the experience.

Conclusions

Once the initial newness of the strategy had been fully absorbed by all those involved, there was a large degree of satisfaction with the innovation. Where the approach was especially successful it was observed that teachers were sensitive to the particular competencies that they were trying to promote in trainees, the trainees were more active than in the previous shared teaching activities and they made a more significant contribution towards the learning of children as well as their own development. All parties were interacting openly and with commitment and there was much evidence of the development of a *collaborative teacher culture* (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990). Trainees were supporting and advising each other in a variety of formal and informal ways and this developed stronger professional relationships and revealed essential professional knowledge (Schön, 1983).

Evaluation feedback from the trainees stated that they found the group discussions

"invaluable" and that by adhering to the advice, they were conducted in an atmosphere of fairness and honesty. Not to offer thoughtful feedback was seen to be "doing my colleagues a disservice" and many thought the process helped to form strong bonds between the students. Another trainee saw the observation role as "acting as a mirror" for the observed person.

The format of this process enabled "difficult but interesting discussions" to be conducted in a manner which was "positive and constructive". From the preliminary group meeting all the trainees understood the intentions of the particular teaching they observed and they had had the opportunity to make a small contribution to its form. This approach to the development of professional skills repeatedly emphasised the point that careful planning was an essential feature of effective teaching.

At the feedback sessions it was important for teachers to guide, probe important points and challenge assumptions without dominating the discussion. Most were already very adept at this practice and were able to make their own contributions surface through the group work. Without exception the trainees placed considerable value on the views of the teachers.

Trainees in training need to develop the personal confidence to work closely with colleagues and to acquire the communication skills which will facilitate open and frank professional exchange. There is no doubt that this particular approach to the peer-review of professional practice made a major contribution towards these ends.

References

- Hargreaves, A. and Dawe, R. (1990) Paths of Professional Development: Contrived Collegiality, Collaborative Culture and the Case of Peer Coaching, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Vol. 6, No.3, pp227-241.
- Schön, D.A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*, New York, Basic Books.
- Schön, D.A. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, New York, Basic Books.
- Walker, R and Adelman, C. (1987) *A Guide to Classroom Observation*, Methuen.

NEMEC

National Electronics and Microtechnology Education Centre

ELECTRONICS In DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY

NEMEC offers two 5-day INSET Courses

ELECTRONIC CONTROL SYSTEMS for DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY

15-19 July or 16-19 December 1996

For GCSE 'D & T Systems' or 'GNVQ Manufacturing'
structured course using a wide range of equipment to cover curriculum and content. Electronics, microprocessors, computer control, pneumatics.

ELECTRONICS in DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY

22-26 July or 16-19 December 1996

Intensive course for schools starting 'D & T Electronic Products'
GCSE in 1996.
Essential electronics, teaching approaches and equipment appraisal.
Use of systems kits : from systems to components.

Course fee: £275 + vat plus £160 full residential
at University of Southampton

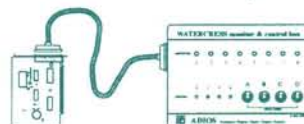
PUBLICATIONS

Science & Technology with Electronics Professional Development for Teachers

Send for full list.

ADIOS PC

Monitor and Control System £195



Fast & flexible!

includes free 'Javelin' software
4 analogue; 4 digital inputs
8 digital outputs : Fits any PC AT bus

NOW also available with FLOWOL flowchart software
£50 single user or £200 site licence



27 years of supporting Technology with mechanical, electrical,
electronic and structural components, materials and tools.

NOW dealing in



the system we all grew up on!

FOR ALL ENQUIRIES, LISTS & DETAILS phone
SSTF on 01703 558379 fax: 01703 672714

or write to

SSTF, University of Southampton, SO17 1BJ
Charity No. 307298
Member of the SATRO Network